It Finally Clicked!

By Lt. Seth C. Gagliardi

We left North Island Naval Air Station on a night and NVD-requalification mission off of the Southern California and Mexican coast. The flight turned out to be anything but standard. Flying H-46s off San Diego is usually a relaxed event, the weather is reliable, and there are plenty geographical landmarks and lights. For an H2P, who had been around the squadron for a while, night and NVD flights off the coast were a regular occurrence (especially since I was slated for a 'Gator cruise).

Tonight, we had the added benefit of company traffic going with us; the two aircraft would fly loose form out to the ship and take turns using the deck for our requal events.

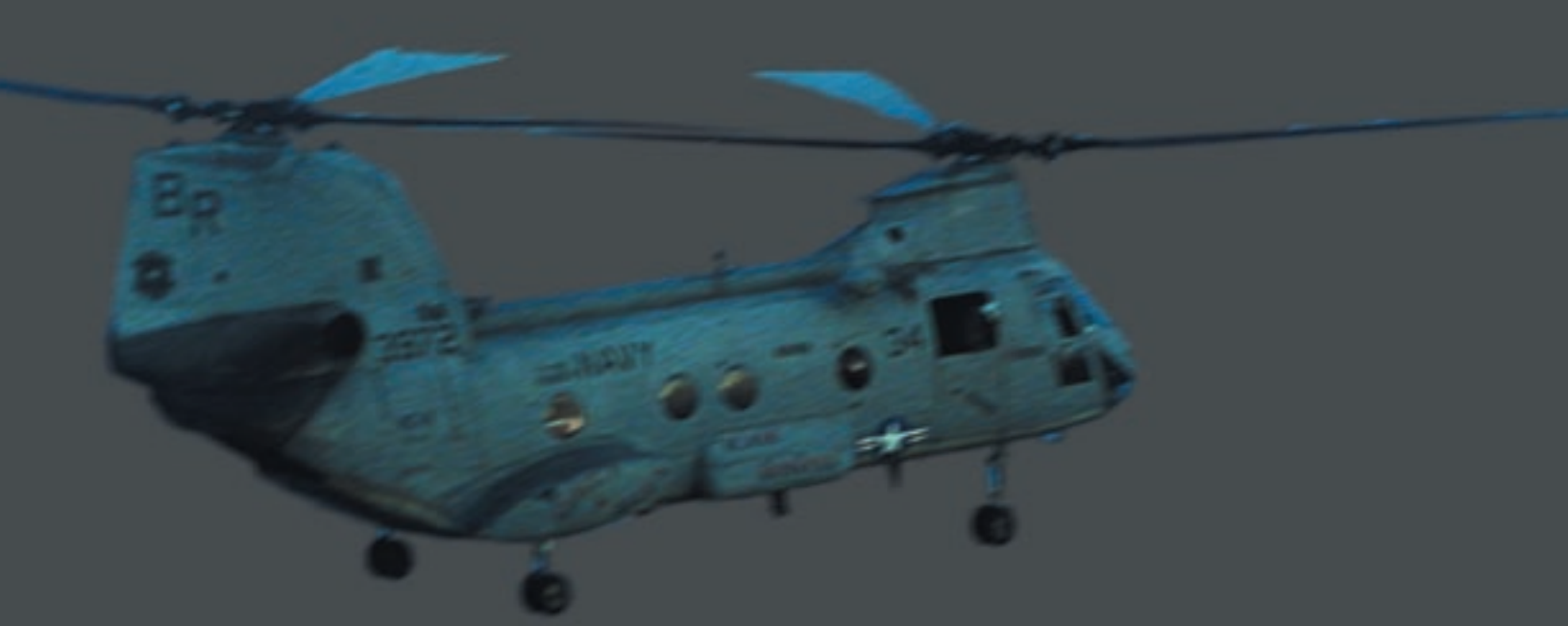
At the brief, we discussed several issues that concerned us. We would be low-light all night, and the weather was clear, with a ceiling of 800 feet. The ship, while still within our mandated range for flights from shore, was farther out than usual, around 70 to 80 miles.

We received pigeons to the ship before launch and began the flight unaided. The ship was off the coast of Mexico, farther south than normal. It was working its way north at a snail's pace toward W-291, our operating area. We were able to reach Beaver control and requested flight following. As we flew closer to the ship, our altitude limitations, because of weather, would make it hard to communicate with Beaver control. We set a bingo and kept our primary TACAN dialed up (our reference for the pigeons we had received).

The frequency for ship's center was set in our bottom radio, and we tried to contact them. We still were no-joy on the ship when TACAN information from the primary station was lost. We set in the ship's TACAN channel, but it wouldn't lock on. All attempts to check with Beaver control for updated pigeons were unsuccessful. As predicted, our limited altitude hampered our ability to maintain communications. With 15 to 20 minutes before our bingo, we advised our playmate to dial up the squadron's back-door frequency. The two HACs decided to press on until we reached bingo, and, if we still hadn't established comms or a TACAN lock, we would turn around.

After 10 minutes, the ship's TACAN began to come in; the DME showed first; and the spinning needle eventually settled down to indicate the ship was 20 degrees farther west. We re-evaluated our fuel situation and decided to con-

H-46 photo by PHAN Alisha Clay
Background photo by Evelyn Odango
Photo-composite by Patricia Eaton



tinue. We told the second aircraft we had the ship's TACAN and again attempted to contact the ship. After two minutes, the ship responded, and told us we would have a green deck on arrival and provided their numbers. We continued inbound, landed and fueled.

After fueling, we coordinated flight operations with the ship. The scenarios would progress from unaided to aided operations. Although we had encountered a variety of minor problems on the flight out (loss of comms with Beaver control, no reliable TACAN for about 10 to 15 minutes, and the ship's course being more northwest than north), we concentrated more on our immediate training. However, we failed to talk about how those factors might affect our return flight. I was one of three pilots requaling and wasn't scheduled to be in the cockpit for the return trip, but my failure to think about possible contingencies almost came back to bite me.

We dropped off the two other pilots, who had been in the back of the H-46, so they could relax in the wardroom. The plan was to conduct a night vertrep to the aft spot of the LPD, while the other aircraft would cycle in to the forward spot for DLQs. However, the ship did not yet have a staged load, so we took turns on the forward spot and waited to break off for the night vertrep. There were no problems throughout the training, and we soon began the night vertrep. Once that was completed, we advised the ship and our other aircraft we would be off the ship's starboard side, working low and doing doppler approaches. The horizon was nearly non-existent, but the HAC and I had flown together several times, and we felt comfortable.

After knocking out the required number of dopplers, we climbed out and decided it was time to refuel and swap out pilots. They then could get on with their unaided work before both aircraft started aided ops. We had 50 minutes of gas left and advised tower we were inbound for a hot pump and crew swap. Just after they acknowledged us, the ship disappeared. Nothing. No lights, other than our partner's anti-smacks (they had been the port side of our now non-existent ship, wrapping up their low work). We attempted to contact the ship, no luck. Then we called the other aircraft and asked if they saw or were able to contact the ship—no luck on their part, either.

We began to evaluate our options. The last time we had checked, North Island was 80 miles away. I hoped we now were closer, but the ship had been heading west as well as north, so there was no guarantee on that. We had no pigeons, no comms with the ship or Beaver control, no ship's TACAN, and no lock on any of the shore stations. The one divert field that usually could be relied on, San Clemente Island, was farther away than North Island because of the southern position of the ship. The only GPS available were the handhelds we carried, and they are known to have trouble acquiring signals in flight. To get them to work, you must hold them out the cockpit window at an angle and hope they pick up on signals that come in under the rotor arc. It seems the rotor arc tends to obscure, or, at least delay, any reliable input.

We decided to goggle up and at least give ourselves with some assurance the ship still existed. Sure enough, they were DIW, completely blacked out, and landing there still was a better option than trying to get to North Island with roughly 40 to 45 minutes of fuel left. We discussed this with the other aircrew, and came to the same conclusion. Landing goggled on a DIW ship wasn't something any of us wanted to do, but it seemed better than taking our chances with a dead-reckoning return to North Island. Since we had less fuel than the other aircraft, we were elected to attempt the first landing. After burning down fuel, we flew by the ship, close abeam. They were pitching and rolling outside landing limits (normal is 3-degrees pitch and 5-degrees roll; the ship was experiencing roughly 5-to 8-degrees pitch and 10-to 13-degrees roll).

Tower contacted us when we had 25 minutes of fuel left. The ship had experienced an engineering casualty and had pumped a significant amount of hot oil over the engine room. They were unable to get underway for our landings, but they would have power to the lights within a few minutes. Sure enough, their flight deck lit up just after the call, a very welcome sight. We degoggled and prepared for our landing. Surprisingly, the HAC left me at the controls.

Rolling onto final, I intermittently lost sight of the flight deck as the ship rolled toward and away from us. This was a very disorienting situation, not quite a case of vertigo, but I was unable to reliably judge altitude and closure rate, and waved off.

Landing goggled on a DIW ship wasn't something any of us wanted to do.

I decided on my next approach to come in higher than normal but failed to inform the HAC of my decision, resulting in a second waveoff at his behest. I explained my plan to come in higher than normal, on an almost precision-approach profile. He told me he didn't like that plan (yet) and would take the controls on the next attempt.

His first attempt ended the same way as my initial try; since he also had trouble gauging relative altitude and closure rate. He then made the call that coming in on a higher than normal profile was our best bet. We advised the aircrewmen we would be in a high hover over the ship, and we would depend on their calls to the deck even more than usual.

The HAC made the approach and began to come down with the crewmen's calls, but, because of the extreme pitch and roll, we waffled over the deck as the spot moved out from under us. We finally came down—hard! The brakes kicked off, and we began to roll forward toward the edge of the flight deck. The HAC and I raced for the brakes, and the LSE ran to avoid being hit.

We finally were chocked and chained when the other H-46 called inbound, but we quickly advised them to wait until we had fueled and launched. Having them attempt what we had just gone through, while we were spinning and fueling, seemed like a recipe for disaster. They agreed to wait, but just then, the tower told us the ship had regained propulsion, and the pitch and roll would be coming within limits momentarily. Fortunately, they would be spared the sweatex that we just had endured.

The rest of the night was uneventful, and we returned to North Island without further complications. We were fortunate the ship was able to regain some power and to provide us with a lighted flight deck. But, we had ignored several things in the course of our training. We failed to regularly get updated pigeons to North Island, or even upon check-in with the ship. We failed to monitor our fuel to make sure there was enough to get back to North Island, if we were unable to land on the ship (not always a possibility, but in this instance, it was). We had not sought other ships in the area that we could use as alternates.

Throughout flight school and in the RAG, instructors talked about being able to see a student "click," Seeing them finally get the principle of hovering or vertrep. As a student you can feel yourself begin to "get it" sometimes. This was my first experience in a fleet squadron where I had that feeling. I had learned the hard way to think out contingencies that may exist outside the aircraft, and I won't forget that lesson.

Lt. Gagliardi flies with HC-11.